Wildlife Conservation Society

Implementing EU Support to Tackle Wildlife Trafficking

Examples from the Field

4 December 2024

INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a vital and unique role in contributing to efforts to counter wildlife trafficking, by partnering with governments, local authorities, Indigenous Peoples (IPs), and local communities (LCs). The European Union (EU) has supported NGOs, including the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), to implement activities which are having an impact in tackling and preventing wildlife crime. WCS's strategic approach focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of the people and places involved in trafficking wildlife from source sites along the illicit supply chain to demand markets, to design strategic interventions at key points that have the greatest impact on preventing and deterring wildlife trafficking. This briefing presents several case studies of EU-funded, WCS-led 'on-the-ground' initiatives and holistic approaches to tackling wildlife trafficking in partner countries across the globe. In addition, the document highlights key recommendations as to how continued support to 'on-the-ground' NGOs can further increase these impacts and sustain the successes in the fight against wildlife trafficking.

Wildlife trafficking has become one of the most lucrative criminal activities and constitutes one of the most immediate threats to biodiversity in many parts of the world. Around the globe, wildlife is being bought and sold on an increasingly massive scale as pets, meat, food, medicine, furs, feathers, skins, and trophies.

In addition to harming wildlife species, wildlife trafficking undermines local livelihoods and further weakens impoverished rural economies. As highlighted by the European Commission's study on the interaction between security and wildlife conservation in sub-Saharan Africa[1], wildlife trafficking weakens the rule of law, exacerbates corruption, triggers conflicts, funds organised crime syndicates, and in some cases contributes to migration flows. With the emergence and spillover of pathogens, and spread of diseases of zoonotic origin such as COVID-19, the world is becoming acutely aware of the threats that wildlife trade – both legal and illegal, particularly in live wild animals, pose to global health, human wellbeing, and global economic security.

The EU has an important role to play in addressing wildlife trafficking, as it constitutes one of the world's largest destination markets, a hub for trafficking in transit to other parts of the world, as well as the source region for illegal trade in some species. The annual global value of trafficking in wildlife is estimated at €7-21 billion[2]. The need to address wildlife trafficking was confirmed by the Council conclusions in May 2021 setting the EU's priorities for the fight against serious and organised international crime under the European multi-disciplinary platform against criminal threats (EMPACT) 2022-2025[3].

In February 2016, the European Commission adopted its first EU Action Plan to tackle wildlife trafficking[4] within the EU and to strengthen the EU's role in the global fight against these illegal activities. The plan had three main components – greater enforcement, better cooperation, and more effective prevention, and was implemented jointly by the EU (Commission services, EEAS, Europol, Eurojust) and its Member States until 2020. In November 2022, the EU published a revised Action Plan[5], which will guide new EU actions against wildlife trafficking until 2027, building on the first Action Plan adopted in 2016. This revised Action Plan demonstrates that the EU takes wildlife trafficking seriously by continuing its ambitious agenda to tackle this criminal activity, which threatens species populations, undermines local security and governance, and weakens rural livelihoods. WCS strongly supports this key initiative by the EU to combat wildlife trafficking and looks forward to continuing collaborating on addressing this critical issue.
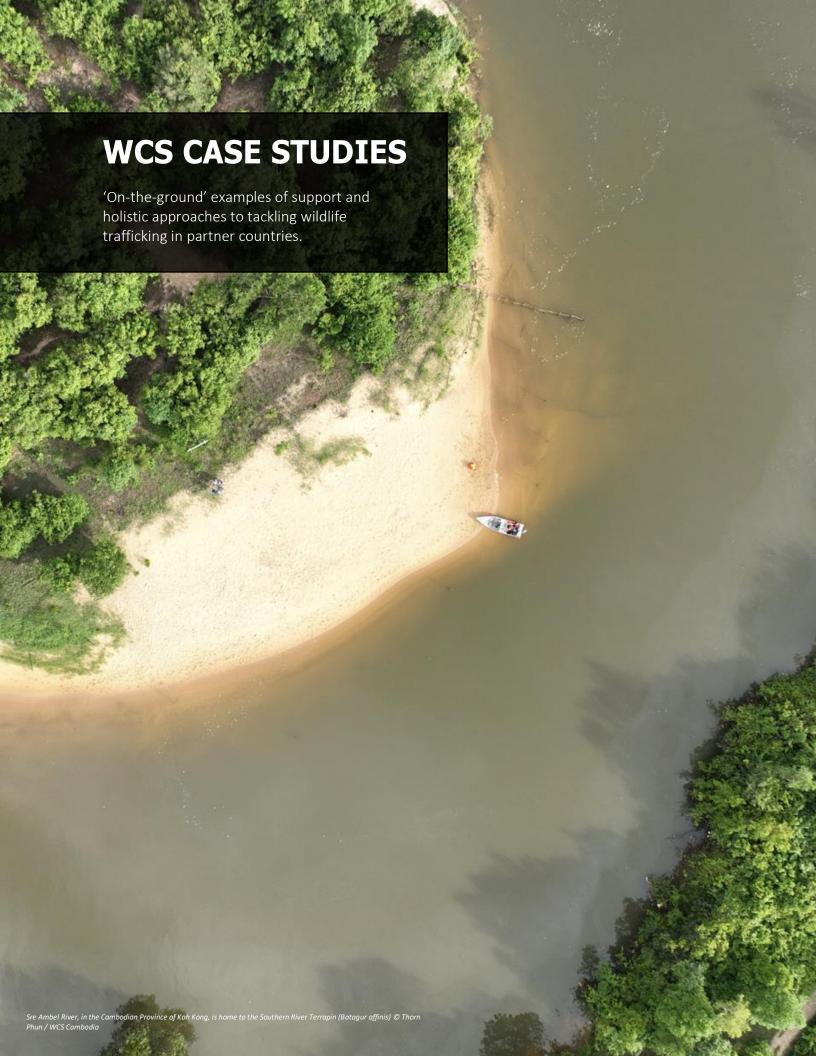
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[1] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/53ed0515-de76-11e9-9c4e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en
[2] https://www.thegef.org/what-we-do/topics/illegal-wildlife-trade
[3] https://www.europol.europa.eu/crime-areas-and-statistics/empact
[4] https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/nature-and-biodiversity/wildlife-trade_en
[5] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6538

WCS CASE STUDIES

'On-the-ground' examples of support and holistic approaches to tackling wildlife trafficking in partner countries.

Sre Ambel River, in the Cambodian Province of Koh Kong, is home to the Southern River Terrapin (Batagur affinis) © Thorn Phun / WCS Cambodia

❶ AFRICA

BACKGROUND

The Niassa Special Reserve (NSR) in northern Mozambique is one of Africa's largest protected areas. Many wildlife species in the Reserve, including elephants, lions, leopards, and pangolins face significant threats from poaching, and illegal logging for timber products for local and international trade. It is of paramount importance to the local communities and the Mozambique government to secure viable biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Reserve.

The EU-funded initiative '**Disrupting Illicit Supply Chains of Wildlife in the Niassa Special Reserve through Law Enforcement and Community Engagement**', implemented between 2021 and 2024, aimed to ensure a healthy, functioning and resilient ecosystem in the Reserve.

KEY OBJECTIVES

1. **Reduce threats** to wildlife and other natural resources, support the community's livelihood security and reinforce its involvement in the management and development of the Reserve;
2. **Enhance conservation** of elephants, lions, leopards, African wild dogs, pangolin and Miombo woodlands, through coordinated actions against poaching and other illegal activities;
3. **Improve relevant governance processes,** supporting efficient mechanisms of judicial follow-up.

African savanna elephant (Loxodonta africana) in the Niassa Special Reserve, Mozambique. © ANAC
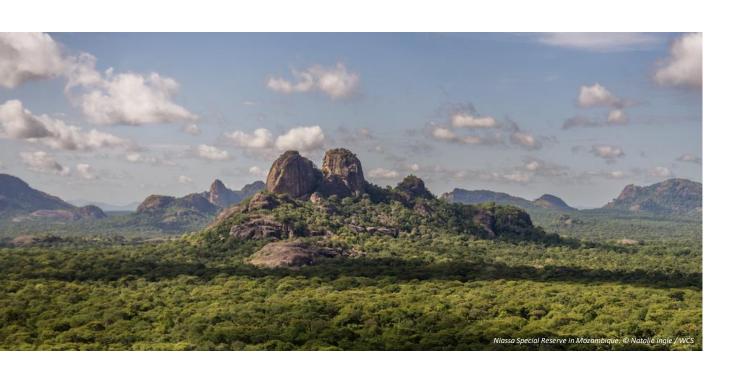
STRATEGY & ACTIVITIES

WCS, in collaboration with the Ministry of Land and Environment of Mozambique (MTA) through the National Administration for Conservation Areas (ANAC), has been working to jointly manage the Niassa Special Reserve (NSR) since 2021, under a 20-year agreement. Other organisations, including Fauna & Flora and its affiliate, Chuilexi Conservancy, are also actively involved in this initiative. The NSR partners are committed to enhancing community support for conservation within the Reserve. This includes initiatives aimed at improving local livelihoods, developing a community conservation strategy, establishing natural resource governance systems, strengthening resource tenure arrangements for local residents, mitigating human-wildlife conflicts, and continuing or establishing programmes to support the livelihoods of local communities. Furthermore, collective efforts within the NSR encompass several other key areas, including intelligence gathering and analysis, infrastructure development and maintenance, aerial surveillance, law enforcement, and patrol monitoring using SMART technology.

KEY RESULTS (2021 – 2024)

- 86 NSR law enforcement coordination meetings were held to help strengthen relationships and improve activity effectiveness with between agencies including Rapid Intervention Unit Police, Natural Resources and Environment Protection Police, Provincial and district courts and prosecutors' office, and Natural Resource Management Committees.
- Refresher training on SMART technology, wildlife legislation, first aid, and patrol planning was provided to scouts, resulting in over 1,950 participations.
- 223 illegal camps and 12,151 wildlife traps and snares were removed.
- 196 farmers from Matondovela, Guebuza, Mussoma, Ntimbo I and II, Alassima, Mucoria and Naulala communities were trained in production of chilli balls to deter crop raids by elephants and buffalos.
- Review of 95 business plans for the implementation of associations and/or co-operatives in the NSR.
- Monitoring of the beekeeping programme installed in 2021 benefited 90 NSR families.

Niassa Special Reserve in Mozambique. © Natalie Ingle / WCS

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Aerial surveys alone do not provide sufficient data on most wildlife species to track population trends effectively. To get a clearer picture, it is essential to complement aerial surveys with field-based transects and other survey methods.
- Unpredictable weather patterns and shifting wildlife behaviours due to climate change underscored the importance of adaptive management strategies. This approach allows for better resource allocation and more effective responses to emerging challenges.
- Natural Resource Management Committees and Councils are not necessarily representative of the larger community. Establishing Reserve Community Dialogue Fora can help to improve the community representation.
- Involving women strengthens broader community support, as they play vital roles in resource management and household decisions. Their involvement in all project phases enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of conservation efforts.
- Further investing in building the capacity of private sector operators is important to help compensate for limitations in co-management and insurgency-related issues.
- Effectively applying the law, optimising resources, and protecting vulnerable species require a holistic intelligence-led approach. This involves the intelligence cycle's stages: identification, gathering, processing, analysis, and dissemination.
- Building trust and strong relationships with law enforcement agencies and state entities, such as customs, outside of the protected area / landscape context is critical to ensure smooth communication and information sharing.

African wild dog (Lycaon pictus) in Mozambique. © ANAC

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➋ AMERICAS

BACKGROUND

The Andean-Amazon countries are home to a great biological and cultural diversity that provides indispensable environmental goods and services; however, this diversity is threatened by the advance of the agricultural frontier, the continuous construction of highways, the development of extractive and large infrastructure projects, and the increasing illegal and unsustainable extraction of wildlife and timber.

The regional initiative **Alliance for Wildlife and Forests**, funded by the EU, led by WCS, and implemented between 2019 and 2023 in partnership with WWF on illegal timber trade aspects, sought to enhance the role of civil society to strengthen the application and compliance of the law to fight against wildlife and timber trafficking, as well as cooperation with and between the authorities of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and the tri-border Amazon areas with Brazil.

KEY OBJECTIVES

1. **Improve a common understanding of the dynamics of wildlife and timber trafficking in the region**, generating diagnoses for the countries and their border zones about emerging trends and priority species to strengthen the fight against existing illegal trade;
2. **Develop collaboration mechanisms between civil society and government agencies** to improve law enforcement and control and surveillance systems to address wildlife and timber trafficking;
3. **Inform and engage civil society allies in the promotion and development of actions, in cooperation with authorities,** to combat wildlife and timber trafficking, keeping them informed, aware and engaged, as key actors in these efforts.

Matamata turtle (Chelus spp.). © Michell Leon / SERFOR

STRATEGY & ACTIVITIES

The Alliance compiled, systematised, and analysed information about wildlife and timber trade, legal and illegal, which allowed the building of national diagnoses for border areas and other reports on new trends and modalities, such as online wildlife trafficking. This information had a regional scope to increase attention in international spaces and was disseminated to more than 50 government authorities and civil society partners in the countries where the project was implemented. The Alliance increased authorities' capacities to detect and investigate wildlife trafficking cases.

In addition, the Alliance worked to inform and engage civil society organisations (CSOs) through actions to reduce demand, including communication campaigns using behavioural science to generate citizen commitments against wildlife trafficking.

Furthermore, the Alliance worked on the use and promotion of 3 digital tools to facilitate the registration, systematisation and exchange of information on commercialised species, in accordance with international norms and regulations.

KEY RESULTS (2019 – 2023)

- Capacity building of governmental authorities, Indigenous Peoples' Organisations, and CSOs, through 49 training sessions (e.g., sniffer dogs to detect wildlife) to improve wildlife monitoring and surveillance: +1100 members of governmental agencies and civil society with strengthened capacities.
- 5 national agreements (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru), and 3 bi-national instruments (Colombia - Ecuador, Ecuador - Peru and Colombia - Peru), with the participation of governments and civil society, were supported to improve law enforcement and implementation of monitoring and surveillance systems.
- Inclusion and development of the first frame of reference for a behavioural change approach to combat wildlife trafficking in Andean-Amazonian countries.
- Technical support to authorities for the amendment of the Peruvian Criminal Code through Law N° 31622 which increased the penalties for wildlife-related offenses.
- Technical assistance to authorities for the organisation of the 1st and 2nd High-Level Conferences of the Americas on Illegal Wildlife Trade (2019 and 2022), which resulted in the Lima Declaration and the Buckingham Palace and Mansion House Declarations.

A captive jaguar (Panthera onca) in Pucallpa, Peru.© Musuk Nolte / WCS Peru

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- Greater efforts are required to understand the cross-cutting impacts of environmental crimes on wildlife, forests, biodiversity, economies and the people, so that these crimes are not treated in silos by the various governmental entities involved. Efforts should also be made to facilitate dialogue with civil society and private sector.

- Criminals are continuously adapting to specific social, political and economic contexts, thus the investment to update our understanding of the dynamics of these crimes needs to be sustained.

- Further efforts are required to promote legal and regulatory reforms to raise the seriousness of these crimes, and thus generate the enabling conditions required for greater investment and coordination within and between countries.

- Further support is needed for the establishment of collaboration mechanism to access and complement governmental data with information from other sources, such wildlife rescue centres and/or private companies (e.g. transportation and port management companies).

- Improving civil society's engagement in conservation is key, e.g., through increasing regional awareness on the negative effects of environmental crimes via science-based behavioural change interventions.

- There is a need to strengthen and resource Indigenous Peoples and local communities' capacities in territorial management and other CSOs' capacities to report on threats and conservation crimes, and to protect Indigenous territories, local community lands and natural resources from poaching or other illicit actions.

- Strengthening the capacities of key government actors is needed so they can respond to alerts or complaints from CSOs and other relevant stakeholders.

Red-banded poison dart frog (Oophaga lehmanni). © Jonathan Vanegas / WCS Colombia

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③ ASIA

BACKGROUND

Wildlife trafficking is devastating populations of many species across Asia. A large number of species native to the region are threatened primarily by poaching, due to international demand for their specimens, parts and products.

The **Partners Against Wildlife Crime** was a regional EU-funded action, implemented between 2019 and 2023 in seven Asian countries (i.e. Cambodia, China, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam) through a consortium of twelve national and international partner organisations, led by WCS. The project aimed to disrupt illicit supply chains from source to market for tiger, Asian elephant, Siamese rosewood, and freshwater turtles.

KEY OBJECTIVES

1. **Enhance protection in key source sites** for tigers, Asian elephant, freshwater turtles, and rosewood in Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia;
2. **Increase effectiveness of law enforcement and justice sectors and of private sectors response** to combat wildlife trafficking along trading routes;
3. **Increase transboundary coordination** to combat wildlife trafficking between Mekong countries and China through CSO-Government partnerships;
4. **Enhance demand reduction efforts by governments and NGOs** by establishing the capacity to apply behavioural insights approaches to demand reduction efforts in China.

STRATEGY & ACTIVITIES

To achieve the overall project goal and objectives, targeted interventions were implemented along the entire supply chain simultaneously and in a coordinated manner.

At the source site level, activities were designed to increase community participation in enforcement, protection and management of target species and source areas, and improve livelihood security through diversification. In parallel, the project enhanced the protection of source sites through community-NGO-government partnerships that support strategic patrols and information gathering in and around the sites. Collaboration with the transport sector and e-commerce and social media platforms aimed to improve their internal risk management and prevention activities.

The project increased cooperation between enforcement agencies, NGOs, and the media by facilitating partnerships that provide technical and strategic support, guidance and leverage for enforcement and judicial processes.

The last component focused on reducing intentions to purchase products made from tiger, elephant, and freshwater turtles in China, using techniques grounded in behavioural science.

KEY RESULTS (2019 – 2023)

- 12,592 participants attended community meetings in source sites and 5,986 households participated in alternative income generating activities (e.g., weaving, organic herb farming, coffee growing and roasting, fish aquaculture, and vegetable growing).
- 6,233 days of joint patrols conducted in source sites.
- Threats encountered in 2023 during patrols decreased by 72% in Cambodia, 88% in Malaysia, and 89% in Thailand, compared to 2019 levels.
- 3,237 reports of online posts related to wildlife trafficking shared with online platforms.
- 141 criminal cases on target species supported by WCS and partners in Cambodia (96 cases), Laos (20 cases), and Viet Nam (25 cases); these cases were related to various freshwater turtle, mammals and primate species, and tiger products.
- A Behavioural Insights Unit established at Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) in China, focused on wildlife consumption.
- 10 campaigns conduced to reduce demand for target species products using behavioural science methods: 6 campaigns to reduce consumption of elephant skin, 2 campaigns to reduce the purchase of freshwater turtle pets, and 2 campaigns to reduce consumption of tiger bone.

Community gathering of women in the Thung Yai Naresuan Wildlife Sanctuary in Thailand. © SNF/WCS

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Indochinese tiger (Panthera tigris corbetti) in the Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary in Thailand. ©DNP/WCS

- Livelihood activities can significantly contribute to providing alternative sources of income to potential offenders. However, they require careful planning and flexibility during implementation due to the fragility and context dependency of entrepreneurial activities. Business plans, market studies, consumer insights, and commercial expertise should be provided to ensure initiative sustainability.

- Behaviour change science is intricate and relatively new in wildlife conservation. Our research highlights a lengthy journey from awareness to behaviour change. While wildlife consumption is an individual behaviour, it is greatly influenced by the social context. This requires involving a broad range of actors who are likely to influence consumer behaviour. Research continuity and partner network expansion are vital for developing, implementing, and scaling up interventions for wildlife demand reduction and behaviour change.

- Wildlife trafficking chains are complex, dynamic, and involve many intermediaries. They adapt to time, place, and evolving criminal opportunities. Comprehensive research is essential to understand specific trafficking challenges, including the "who / what / when / where / why / how" aspects. Criminology tools like problem profiles and crime scripts, tested in this initiative, provide valuable insights into wildlife crime. Using these tools to gather evidence for informed strategies is critical.

- Despite years of regional efforts by diverse stakeholders, the online illegal wildlife trade thrives. Control challenges persist due to the dark web and private communication channels, alongside incomplete legislation. Nevertheless, valuable open-source information remains available for monitoring trade patterns and trends, and potentially countering it with the help of online platforms.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the lessons learned from these case studies, we provide three sets of key recommendations of how further EU support can expand the work being done by 'on-the-ground' NGOs to counter wildlife trafficking.

Wildlife Demand Reduction
- Implement demand reduction initiatives by establishing in-country capacity within government, academia, and local NGOs to apply a behavioural insights approach. Behavioural insights draw from the fields of behavioural science, economics and psychology and bring a science-based experimental method to understanding the behaviour, designing a behaviour-change intervention, and critically, in measuring the impact of the intervention;
- Acknowledge that target audience for an intervention to reduce consumption is not always the consumer; and expand interventions past the more traditional communication-heavy, awareness-raising campaigns to include policies, system changes, product and service design and 'nudges' that alter the environment where the choices take place.

Capacity Building of Government including Law Enforcement
- Establish institutionalised, long-term, professional leadership courses for officers in strategic agencies and localities.
- Enhance the capacity of governments through real-time support and on-the-job coaching programs;
- Support and partner with governments on in-depth research to identify and develop an understanding of the people involved (e.g., specific consumer groups, financiers, coordinators) and locations along the supply chain (e.g., villages, border crossings, ports, farm, shops, e-commerce sites, financial institutions, markets) that have the greatest influence on wildlife trafficking;
- Support governments, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities to develop and implement highly focused strategies with interventions that target those specific people or locations. Specific interventions and tactics vary across the geographies but may include, for example, legal reforms, public interest litigation, targeted communications, strengthening international cooperation, technology, restorative justice, more traditional fines, and custodial sentences;
- Support governments to strengthen international enforcement cooperation through the development of formal legal mechanisms for judicial cooperation, and in parallel broker relationships between key officers so they can develop trust to share information and coordinate enforcement operations informally;
- Ensure respect for human rights principles and rule of law in law enforcement implementation, particularly in areas of weak governance, and ensure that conservation work does not harm the vulnerable and supports the fulfilment of rights in the context of conservation and natural resource management.

Capacity Building of Non-Government Actors
- Local NGOs and academics: Conduct technical training for local NGOs and academics on specific skills from crime prevention, behaviour change, policy advocacy, to the use of litigation;
- Indigenous Peoples and local communities: Protect the land rights of IPs and LCs; provide technical training and finance to IPs and LCs to support livelihood activities, community patrols, and use of SMART; and support the development of protected area-community communication systems that can serve as grievance redress mechanisms and anonymous monitoring hotlines;
- Journalists: Provide funding and technical training for investigations, and organise coffeehouse events to raise local journalist interest in countering wildlife trafficking;
- Private Sector: Organise knowledge exchange to increase awareness of the illegal wildlife trade, skills to detect suspicious transactions, enhance cooperation and coordination on investigation and reporting; and support social media and e-commerce platform with risk alerts and training materials to increase capacity of their security management teams to control and prevent illegal trade activities on their platforms.

WHO WE ARE

The **Wildlife Conservation Society** (WCS) is a global conservation organisation with the largest and longest-standing field conservation programme in the world, covering over 20 million square kilometres across more than 55 countries, primarily in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. WCS has over 200 local staff in more than 30 countries dedicated to counter wildlife trafficking who work in close partnership with more than 500 government agencies, and 150 local CSOs, media, and IPs and LCs. For more information, please visit wcs.org

WCS EU is a Belgian NGO based in Brussels, affiliated to WCS. WCS EU draws on WCS's field-based, technical and scientific knowledge to support the development and implementation of EU policies and programmes, in support of global conservation objectives. For more information, please visit brussels.wcs.org

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Western lowland gorilla (Gorilla gorilla gorilla) in the Nouabalé-Ndoki National Park in the Republic of the Congo. © Scott Ramsay

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